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ABSTRACT

A total of 42 middle-class preschool children (23 boys and 19 girls) ranging in age from 33 to 68 months were studied to determine whether facial attractiveness was related to level of social participation (i.e., the degree to which children played near and interacted with each other). According to a time-sampling procedure, each child was observed on 5 separate days during free play. Attractive girls were found to engage in more interactive play, while less-attractive girls engaged in more noninteractive play. Little relationship was found between attractiveness and social participation in boys. (BJD)

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The Relationship Between Attractiveness and Social Participation In Preschool Age Children

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Abstract

Classmate ratings of facial attractiveness were correlated with the observed level of social participation of 42 preschoolers. Attractive girls were found to engage in more interactive play, while less attractive girls engaged in more non-interactive play. There was little relationship found between attractiveness and social participation in boys.

The Relationship Between Attractiveness and Social Participation In Preschool Age Children

Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) coined the phrase "what is beautiful is good" to describe an apparent stereotype in which attractive individuals are viewed more positively than less attractive individuals on a number of characteristics. For example, when rated by other children, attractive children are more likely to be chosen as potential friends (Dion, 1973); expected to behave more prosocially (Dion & Berschied, 1974); are perceived to be smarter (Langlois & Stephan, 1977); and are judged to be more self-sufficient and independent (Dion & Berschied, 1974) than their less attractive counterparts. However, the question remains as to whether or not these ratings are based solely on expectations, or are they reflections of actual behavioral differences? In addition, rating studies leave open the question of whether or not children are treated differently based on their appearance.

The present investigation was undertaken to determine if level of social participation (i.e., the degree to which children play near and interact with each other) is related to attractiveness. Social participation was chosen as a dependent measure because it may be used to assess the social behavior of a target child, as well as the treatment of a target child by his or her peers. Based on the research on expectations, it was hypothesized that attractive children would be found to be engaged in more interactive play, while less attractive children would be found to be engaged in less social behaviors.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 42 middle-class children (23 boys and 19 girls) ranging in age from 33 months to 68 months (Mean - 50 months) enrolled in one of two preschools. One student withdrew from school before observations were completed and that child's data was not included in the analysis. A second child was not included because that child's parents did not consent to participation.

Procedure

Direct observation of each child's behavior was performed by trained observers as unobtrusively as possible from within the classrooms. Each child was observed during free play on five separate days. It was felt important to observe children during free periods because observations during programmed periods might result in spurious conclusions. For example, children who mostly play by themselves may be classified as more social if observed when their teacher is requiring that they participate in the same activities and use the same toys or objects as other children.

Using a time sampling procedure the children's behaviors were classified as belonging to one of Parten's (1932) social participation categories as derined in Table 1. Observers were trained until they reached and maintained interrater reliabilities ranging from .83 to .96 (Mean - .90) for the various categories of social participation.

Insert Table 1 about here

After the behavioral observations were completed, a facial photograph of each child was taken. A socio-metric-interview technique was used in order to obtain attractiveness ratings based on classmates' perceptions of attractiveness. Subjects' pictures were grouped by classroom and rated only by children from that classroom. Subjects' pictures were presented in sets of four and shown to each child separately. For each child rater new clusterings of pictures were used. Each child was asked first to select the most attractive child from each set of pictures. After a picture was selected it was removed, and the rater was asked to select the most attractive child from the remaining photographs. This selection was also removed and the rater was asked to select the most attractive child from the two reamining photographs. By applying a weight to each choice and then averaging across raters, an attractiveness rating for each child in the study was obtained.

Results

Average level of social participation was found to be positively correlated with classmate ratings of attractiveness in girls, $r(18) = .51$, $p < .05$, but not in boys, $r(22) = -.02$.

When percentage of time observed in each of the individual categories of social participation was correlated with the attractiveness ratings a more consistent effect was found in girls. In girls, attractiveness was positively correlated with associative play, $r(18) = .65$, $p < .001$, and cooperative play, $r(18) = .77$, $p < .001$. But, it was negatively correlated with parallel play, $r(18) = -.58$, $p < .001$. In addition, a negative relationship between attractiveness and unoccupied behavior approached significance, $r(18) = -.34$, $p = .07$.

In boys, attractiveness was negatively correlated with parallel play, $r(22) = -.62$, $p < .001$. There were no other significant relationships between attractiveness and categories of social participation in boys.

Discussion

While parallel play was negatively related to attractiveness in both genders, indicating that less attractive children are more likely to be involved in non-interactive play, no other category of social participation was related to attractiveness in boys. In girls, however, the initial hypotheses were generally confirmed. Attractiveness was positively related to average level of social participation, indicating that the attractive girls were more likely to be observed in interactive play and less likely to be observed in solitary or non-interactive play than their less attractive counterparts. In addition, when individual categories of social participation were considered, attractiveness was positively correlated with the two interactive categories of associative and cooperative play, it was also negatively related to the non-interactive categories of unoccupied and parallel play. These findings indicate that attractiveness has a greater influence on the social participation of girls than boys.

At least for girls, the present findings provide empirical validation for earlier research into perceptions and expectations about attractive children. The current observations of actual behaviors parallel earlier reports on the ratings and expectations of attractive versus unattractive children. In addition, they are consonant with Bar-Tal and Saxe's (1976) conclusions based on a review of the adult literature

that the "beauty-is-good" stereotype is more stringently applied to females than males in our society. The present sample of children appear to have internalized the adult standard that individuals are treated differently based on their level of attractiveness and that this standard of treatment is more stringently applied to females than males.

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Table 1

Social Participation Categories

Unoccupied Behavior	The child apparently is not playing, but occupies him or herself with watching anything that happens to be of momentary interest.
Onlooker	The child spends his/her time watching other children playing. He/she may verbally interact to ask questions or make suggestions, but does not overtly enter into play itself.
Solitary Independent Play	The child plays alone and independently with toys that are different from those used by the children within speaking distance and makes no effort to get close to other children.
Parallel Activity	The child plays beside, but not with other children. He/she plays with toys that are like those which the children around him/her are using, but does not overtly interact with these children.
Associative Play	The child plays with other children. He/she is engaged in similar if not identical activities as the children around him/her and interacts with these children. However, there is no division of labor and no organization of the activity around any material or group goal or project.
Cooperative Play	The child plays in a group that is organized for the purpose of making some material product, or of striving to attain some competitive or group goal. The efforts of one child are supplemented by those of another.

Note. Adapted from Parten (1932).